

Local Government and Communities Committee

Call for Views on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill

Submission from Scottish Youth Parliament, November 2019

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the basis for the Scottish Youth Parliament's (SYP's) vision, mission and values. In particular, SYP embodies Article 12 of the UNCRC, which states that young people have the right to express their views freely and have their opinions listened to in all matters affecting them. As a completely youth-led charity, the words and sentiment of Article 12 have profound importance for our work.

Our Vision

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) is the democratic voice of Scotland's young people. Our vision for Scotland is of a nation that actively listens to and values the meaningful participation of its young people. Our goal is to make this vision a reality, in order to ensure young people in Scotland grow up loved, safe and respected, and able to realise their full potential.

Our Mission

SYP is a rights-based charity, with members supported by all of Scotland's 32 local authorities and 11 National Voluntary Organisations.

SYP's mission is to provide a national platform for young people to discuss the issues that are important to them, and campaign for changes to the nation that they live in. We support our members in their work by training them, supporting their personal development and empowering them, using a youth work ethos.

Our democratically elected members listen to and recognise the issues that are most important to young people in every community across the country and ensure that decision-makers listen to their voices.

Our Values

- **Democracy** – We are youth-led and accountable to young people aged 14 to 25. Our democratic structure and the scale of our engagement across Scotland gives us a mandate that sets us apart from other organisations.
- **Rights** – We are a rights-based organisation. We are passionate about making young people aware of their rights, and ensuring that local and national governments uphold their rights.
- **Inclusion and Diversity** – We are committed to being truly inclusive and work tirelessly to ensure policymakers and politicians hear the voices of young people from every community and background in Scotland.

- **Political Impartiality** – We are independent from all political parties. By working with all stakeholders, groups, and individuals who share our values, we deliver the policies that are most important to young people.

Summary recommendations from SYP

The Scottish Youth Parliament recommends that:

- There be a legal requirement on organisations to provide free period products. National government should fund local councils to carry this out.
- The Bill should allow the Scottish Government to require organisations other than schools and colleges to provide free period products. Products should be available widely to accommodate for periods starting unexpectedly.
- Products should be available in all bathrooms, not just women and girls', to ensure that transgender people have access if needed.
- It makes sense for these to be provided in gender-neutral toilet facilities: *'The Scottish Youth Parliament believes that there should be more publicly available gender-neutral toilet facilities, which are fully accessible to everyone regardless of identity or circumstance, across Scotland's communities.'* SYP Policy statement passed on 27th October 2019 with 70% agreement.
- Reusable period products should be available in addition, not as an alternative, to the products which are currently available. Choice is an important factor for young people.
- There should be more awareness around reusable period products to encourage their use and reduce stigma.
- Local and national government should avoid exclusionary language and branding when choosing period product providers and when providing these products.
- Any scheme to provide products should be 'opt out' rather than 'opt in'. Young people feel that registration processes such as the C-Card or voucher schemes could become a barrier to accessing these products, and voted against these.

Our approach

SYP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Call for Views on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill by the Local Government and Communities Committee (hereinafter referred to as 'the Bill' and 'the Committee') at the Scottish Parliament. This response is based on the findings of co-designed questions in the #WhatsYourTake survey prior to SYP's 70th National Sitting in Dunfermline, Fife and the Consultation Workshop which took place on Sunday 27th October 2019.

The workshop was attended by around 24 young people, called 'Period Products' and co-produced by SYP's Equalities and Human Rights Committee Convener Revati Campbell MSYP and Deputy Convener Erin Campbell MSYP, the Committee and the Scottish Parliament's Community Outreach Team.

Through a series of interactive activities, MSYPs gave their views on how well the current free scheme is working by exploring questions with the Committee around the existing and future provision of sanitary products, and reusable products. These views are summarised below.

The #WhatsYourTake online survey was open from 27th September until 30th October, gathering 817 responses from young people aged 12-25 across Scotland, from all 32 local authorities, [our 11 national voluntary organisations](#) and various others representing a diverse range of communities of interest, lived experience and 'seldom heard' groups (including different faiths, disabilities, care and carer experience, LGBTQI+, a range of cadets, sports and environmental clubs, Shelter and Police Scotland Youth Volunteers).

Background information of survey respondents

The majority of respondents are at school (86%) and aged 12-14 (48%) and 15-17 (42%). 55% of respondents are female, 45% were male, 2% identified as non-binary and 1% prefer to use their own term. 16% of respondents belong to minority ethnic groups.

Findings

What is your experience of the free provision of sanitary products? Please describe and let us know if your experience has been positive or negative, and why.

- No sustainable options are available.
- Some young people don't know how to access products in schools.
- There was concerns raised that the products were often of a poor quality or of an inconsistent quality across schools.
- Products are now provided in sports centres but are 'shocking'.
- Need more variety of products, different sizes for different 'flows'.

- Some pupils had to go through their head teacher who provided envelopes with products but they still had to ask for them and this was not ideal.
- *Hey Girls* packs are provided by Orkney Council and are welcome, however, young people had asked the school to remove the branded packaging and the school refused because of hygiene reasons.
- Some young people in the schools had set up a “period club“ and taken leadership and ownership, making up bags full of products, for heavy to medium flows, leaving the bags in toilets and available for people to take home in the holidays.
- Products should be provided during the holiday period as well as school/college terms.

At the workshop, we also asked if these schemes had had any impacts either positive or negative on young people with protected characteristics so disabled LGBT, religious or ethnic minority background young people or young people or women or girls?

- Products should be available in all bathrooms, not just girls’, to ensure transgender people have access if needed.
- Packaging on the products should be inclusive as there are lots which only use the Venus symbol, they should use inclusive language such as ‘people who menstruate’.
- More needs to be done to educate people who don’t menstruate.
- The availability is a positive thing as students are more confident and have one less thing to worry about.
- Some schools have introduced a card system and if they wish to go to the bathroom they just need to show the card and they are allowed to leave class without making further comment.

Should the Bill allow the Scottish Government to require organisations other than schools and colleges to provide free period products?

At the workshop, there was overwhelming support for this. Products should be available widely to accommodate for periods starting unexpectedly. Many felt that providing period products was simply an extension of a duty of care that schools and colleges already have for their students. A couple of members felt the Bill was too vague and should be specific about where products should be made available. One thought the Scottish Government should be responsible for the funding of all provision even where provision is made within private organisations.

Should there be a legal requirement on organisations to provide free period products?

At the workshop, there was overwhelming support for this. Members felt that national government should fund local councils to carry this out.

The Bill requires the setting up of a scheme to provide products and participants were asked how best they felt the “scheme” should operate and what elements it should include. General comments included:

- That products should be available in schools/colleges, all public buildings and sports clubs.
- That a registration scheme would create a barrier which would make it difficult for people to access and many could not see the point of this additional process. The suggestion of the C-Card scheme was not widely supported and would create a barrier.
- This was related to issues with people registering online for Universal Credit and how it ‘doesn’t work for the people who need it most.’
- If registration was required, this should be online but also on paper as some people don’t have access to the internet.
- Pick up points were suggested.
- Members felt that a delivery service of some kind should be in place so that disabled people or those who could not afford to travel to access products

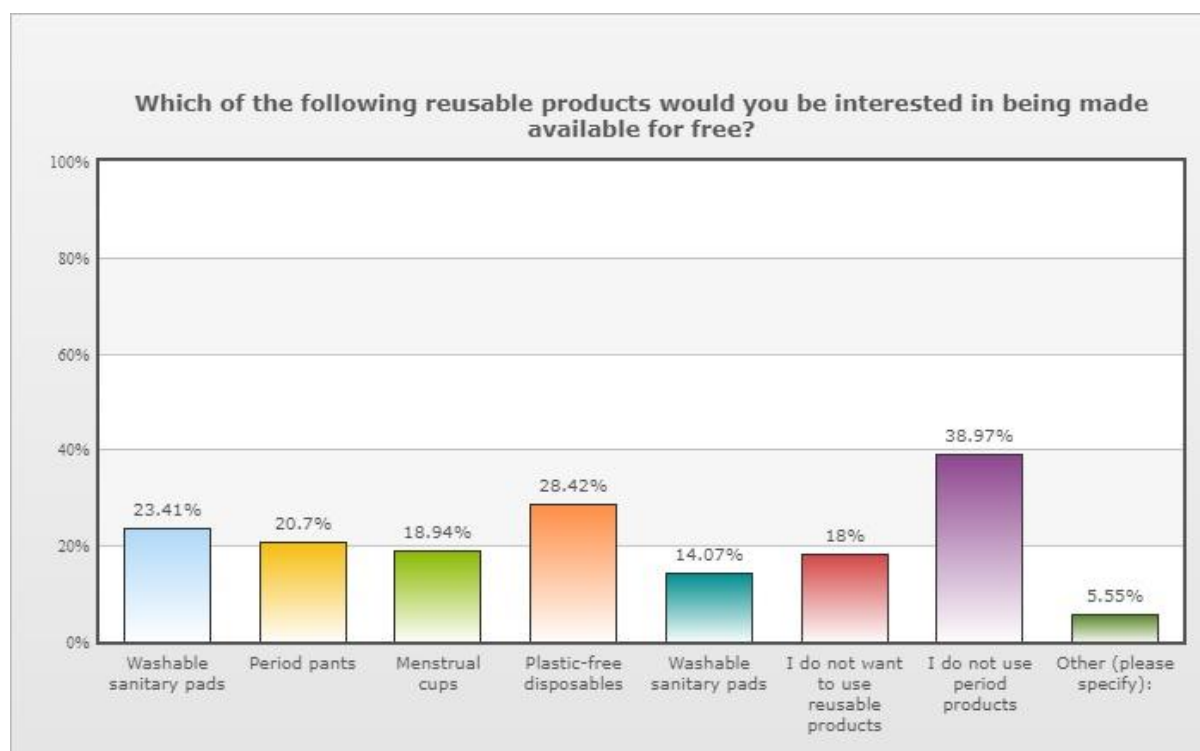
Voucher scheme?

- Voucher scheme was voted against.
- Needs to be unlimited.
- Some suggestions to use the young Scot card for young people, but also acknowledging that not all people have a young Scot card, refugees etc.
- Opt out for schemes rather than opt in.

Please see our findings on reusable products below:

At the workshop, examples were made available and there was overwhelming support for this due to their sustainability. However, members felt that reusable products should be available in addition to, not as an alternative, to the products which are currently available.

Someone also raised that menstrual cups are not always suitable for those with allergies (e.g. to silicon) and those with endometriosis. Others expressed concerns about using them for the first time being ‘intimidating’, potential hygiene issues and the lack of availability and affordability of them, especially if they turn out not to be suitable for the user.



The graph above outlines the survey findings. **The majority of respondents would like reusable products to be available for free**, ranging from 28% in support of plastic-free disposables to 14% for washable sanitary pads. The main reasons for answers were that these products have a better environmental impact, they would save young people money which would end period poverty (10 young people expressly said this), and they are more 'sustainable'.

- *'They will help others a lot if they can't afford period products.'*
- *'I am very aware of my carbon footprint and the impact my actions have on the world around me and if I were able to access reusable sanitary provision for free I would.'*
- *'It is saving the earth and giving people the opportunity to do this when they might not financially be able to do this themselves. So it helps cut down on waste, saving the environment and helping people out of period poverty.'*
- *'Although menstrual cups and washable sanitary towels are fantastic, they're hard to provide for free and a lot of people find them intimidating or don't like to use them. Non plastic disposables decompose, are cheap and are very similar to familiar products so people will like to use them.'*
- *'I use a moon cup which has helped my cramps and saved me so much money.'*
- *Period pants are discrete [sic] and reusable.'*
- *'Menstrual cups are the most sustainable and best economically. Very empowering.'*
- *'It would be good for homeless people.'*

However, one respondent said:

'I've bought a menstrual cup already, but find it difficult to use. My one caveat about providing free re-useable products is that people may waste or dispose of them because they don't need to pay for them. To dispose of these re-useable products would cause [sic] more waste than disposing of the disposable ones.'

Another said: *'I've tried period pants and they were not very good. I would use a reusable option if it was easy to use and convenient. The period pants didn't last a full day for me and were uncomfortable.'*

A few concerns around hygiene were expressed, with a view that products need to be *'accessible for everyone and most hygienic when in public toilets.'* *'There is a question about cleanliness and where these products should be provided.'*

One respondent posed the following questions:

What if you've never been taught how to properly wash, taught personal hygiene? What if you have no washing machine at home? What if you had no money to pay for electricity at home to have hot water to wash washable sanitary pads?' (sic).

Some of the words respondents used may show a stigma around periods: *'embarrassing', 'disgusting', 'messy', 'gross' and 'uncomfortable'.*

'The problem with washable items are that girls would have to do so at the communal bathroom sinks and no one, including myself, would be willing to do that.'

One said: *'I don't know overly too much about them'* and another, *'I've seen the cups before but we haven't been taught much about them and I'd like to try them at some point'*, which could indicate a lack of awareness about these products.

Two survey respondents who selected 'other' specified that they would like reusable tampons also. A few requested condoms to be free, which perhaps shows a lack of awareness that these are available for free at sexual health clinics and some GP surgeries.

Lastly, one person said: *'It's best to have opinions for every lady.'*

Contact and visit us:

Should you wish to meet with us or update us on how the findings will feed into your work, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us using the details below. We hope you have found this engagement with SYP influential, informative and valuable.

Laura Pasternak, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Laura.p@syp.org.uk, 0131 557 0452, www.syp.org.uk, and follow us on Twitter: @OfficialSYP